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SLAYING the MESS

How the Frank Snepp Case Hurts Us All

by Jonathan Alter

Philip Agee is one of those names from the past that keep bubbling to the surface of the news. In June, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the State Department to revoke the passport of the renegade ex-CIA agent, and both houses of Congress have begun consideration of bills that would make it a crime for anyone to imitate Agee and reveal the names of agents, even if that information can be gleaned from public sources.

One suspects the real reason the CIA is pushing this legislation is that its own security system is so lax; most of the classified information Agee has revealed in recent years he learned after leaving the Agency. Instead of cleaning up its act and making it tougher to uncover the names of agents, the CIA wants Congress to go after the symptom of its own ineptitude—the reporting of the information.

All of this, of course, grows out of a new "sensitivity" about national security, but it's fair to say that Agee and his cohorts at *Covert Action Information Bulletin* deserve a share of blame for the backlash. They still fool some people who are unable to distinguish between an attack on the Agency that Agee himself says is intended to destroy it, and the kind of harsh but constructive criticism that might actually allow the CIA to learn something from its past mistakes.

When he is allowed by the government to open his mouth, the best exponent of the latter view is Frank Snepp, the CIA's chief strategy analyst in Vietnam at the end of the war and the author of *Decent Interval*, a gripping and enormously instructive account of the collapse of the Saigon

regime in 1975. Snepp, who left the Agency in 1976 at age 33, knows from personal experience about the CIA's tendency to blame the bearer of bad news instead of deal with its own inadequacy. He also believes Agee's approach is destructive, if not traitorous, and that there has to be a different way to analyze the CIA—a Third Way, it was called, when the subject was the future of Vietnam.

Right now, ironically, considerably worse off than nearly broke. In February

the Supreme Court decreed not only that Snepp had to clear virtually everything he writes—fiction and nonfiction—with the CIA, but that he must "disgorge the benefits of his faithlessness"—a fancy legal way of saying that because he had not cleared the manuscript of *Decent Interval* with the CIA before publication, he had to turn over all the royalties he earned to the government. That has amounted to about \$150,000. Agee was luckier; he drew a liberal judge—Gerhard Gesell—who allowed him to keep the profits from his books.

But the fact that Snepp is broke and Agee isn't may be the least of the poetic injustices involved in the long, drawn-out controversy over the CIA's apostates. What's worse, for Frank Snepp and anyone else interested in reforming the Agency, is that all this talk about naming agents and cracking down on disclosures means Snepp is now indelibly linked in the public's mind with other, less reluctant CIA renegades like Agee, Victor Marchetti, and John Stockwell, who wrote a book revealing secrets about covert operations in Angola.

Newspaper and magazine accounts link them all in one breath; so do recent fiction thrillers like *The Matarese Circle* by Robert Ludlum. When Snepp recently tried to peddle a screenplay about his case, many Hollywood types thought he was Agee. Hadn't he fled abroad to blow secrets and endanger lives by naming names? Snepp hadn't, of course; in a government where too much is over-classified, he revealed no secrets. But the confusion comes as no surprise. When people on the left rise in defense of critical ex-agents, it's natural that Marchetti, Agee, Snepp, and Stockwell get lumped together; those are all the apostates they've got. Over on the right, supporters of the Agency who take a hard line on funny business by ex-agents go further. They take this group and throw them in with men like Frank Terpil and Edwin Wilson,